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ABSTRACT

In the face of declining enrollments, many Iowa rural school districts have begun sharing superintendents. In 1988-89, 88 districts shared 44 superintendents; 42 of these participated in structured interviews for this study. All participants were male. Interviewees indicated that most school boards had undertaken the new arrangement because the Iowa Department of Education offered generous financial incentives for sharing practices or because their districts were considering interdistrict whole-grade sharing or some form of reorganization. Most superintendents reported: (1) large increases in paperwork; (2) significant salary increases; (3) maintenance of a firm work schedule; (4) the need to redefine the superintendent's role (generally toward "manager" and away from "instructional leader"); (5) increased school autonomy as building principals took on the instructional leadership role and some managerial tasks; (6) disorientation and the feeling of leading "a double life" professionally; and (7) efforts to increase management efficiency through local advisory committees or administrative assistants. Participants emphasized that the success of the arrangement depended on: (1) the importance of district compatibility; (2) realistic expectations by both school boards; and (3) the superintendent's prior experience in one of the districts. The most successful arrangements were between districts with a history of shared activities or with plans for future sharing, while the least successful arrangements were those based only on financial motives. Appendices contain the interview questions. (SV)

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The Iowa Experience

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Abstract

Reflections on the Shared Superintendency: The Iowa Experience

Due to the heavy dependence upon agriculture in the state of Iowa, the recession of the early 1980's when combined with declining student numbers has had a profound impact upon education. One consequence of these economic and social developments has been the growing number of school districts which have shared the services of a single superintendent. Based upon interviews with 42 of the 44 shared superintendents the authors were able to shed some light on some of the benefits and hardships associated with this innovative administrative arrangement.

Reflections on the Shared Superintendency: The Iowa Experience

Iowa is a state whose fortunes are inextricably linked to agriculture. With seven of every ten Iowans involved in some agriculture related activity, it is easy for even city dwellers to appreciate the profound effects of the agricultural recession of the early 1980's. It is not overly dramatic to say that the social fabric of many communities was devastated as family farms were foreclosed, banks filed for bankruptcy, and small businesses folded for lack of customers. In this article we will analyze one of the indirect consequences of this agricultural recession on education: the advent of the shared superintendency.

Consideration of demographic data provides a vivid backdrop against which to view developments within public education in Iowa. The 1980 census recorded a population of about 2,914,000. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the state's 1987 population at 2,834,000; a decline of 80,000 people in just seven years. The census Bureau projects a further decline of 7.6 percent between 1990 and the year 2000. Concurrent with this decline in total population, has been a declining birth rate. In 1987 the lowest birth rate on record was registered at 13.2 births per 1000 residents; 10,300 fewer babies were born in 1987 than 1980.

These trends in population demographics have direct implications for public school environments. Low birthrates and out-migration have resulted in a continual decrease in school-age population since it peaked in the 1969-1970 school year when 659,880 students were enrolled. In 1987, Iowa's public K-12 enrollment was 478,859, a loss of over 180,000 students in under two decades. While almost every district in the state has been touched by these declines,

rural schools have been hit hardest. Rural areas, where schools are by nature smaller, have tended to lose the greatest percentage of students. A loss of 60 students in a district of only 300 to begin with can be devastating.

Faced with these demographic patterns, Iowa schools districts have been re-shaping themselves to continue to provide high quality educational programs. Many districts, encouraged by legislative incentives are currently sharing grades, teaching staff, and administrators. Now that such initiatives have been underway for several years, we decided to conduct a detailed study of the shared superintendency. Our aim was to record the first-hand experiences of senior administrators who have been employed simultaneously by two or more neighboring districts.

In 1986-1987, 22 districts shared a superintendency. In 1987-1988 the number rose to 67. By 1988-1989 the figure had risen to 88. Of the 44 shared superintendents in question, 42 agreed to be interviewed to expand the pool of knowledge on this new administrative phenomenon.

Research Methodology

The basic design of the investigation was a qualitative study utilizing the structured interview format. Whenever possible the interview was audio taped for future reflection by the researchers. Three categories of shared superintendents were identified from the Iowa Department of Education reports: those superintendents who had been shared at one time but were no longer employed by more than one school district; those superintendents who were involved in administrative sharing prior to and including the 1988-89 school year; and those superintendents who were new to the shared superintendency for the 1988-89 school year. Appendix A details the questions asked of superintendents in each of the three categories.

A number of the structured interviews were arranged by appointment and conducted in a conference room of the Iowa School Board Association offices in conjunction with the Iowa School Board Association Convention. The remaining interviews were conducted at school sites when the researchers and subjects were able to agree on an appropriate time. The average interview time was ninety minutes. The shortest interview took forty-five minutes and the longest took two hours. The study had a response rate of 95.45%; 42 out of 44 identified shared superintendents participated in the study. One superintendent declined to be interviewed and one superintendent died before the researchers were able to interview him. All of the structured interviews were conducted during the 1988-89 school year.

The research questions that formed the framework of the investigation were as follows:

1. To what extent, if any, were the motives for public school districts to enter into a sharing arrangement financial?
2. What unique challenges have been identified by superintendents involved in the shared superintendency?
3. What lessons have been learned for those who may entertain similar arrangements in the future?

As the researchers interviewed the subjects, and upon subsequent analysis of the aduio tapes, some common themes emerged. The remainder of this article will report those common themes as well as answer the research questions raised by the investigators.

Reasons for Sharing a Superintendent

Aware of the economic and demographic developments within Iowa, we asked each superintendent the reasons why districts chose to share his services. (It

should be noted at this point that all the participants were male). In some cases, the principal reason was financial. Following action by the state legislature, the Iowa Department of Education offers generous financial inducements to districts which engage in sharing practices. A hypothetical example will serve to emphasize this point:

District A K-12 enrollment 350 students

District B K-12 enrollment 200 students

Assume superintendent contract is shared 50:50.

State department formula to calculate number of additional students credited to each district: District enrollment x .05 weighting x % of superintendent's contract.

*District A: 350 x .05 x .50 = 8.75 additional students

District B: 200 x .05 x .50 = 5.00 additional students

Additional funds accrued due to shared superintendent assuming state cost per pupil is $2,800**:

District A: 8.75 x $2,800 = $24,500

District B: 5.00 x $2,800 = $14,000

Total $38,500

*Note--No single district is credited with more than 15 additional students, and no two districts combined are credited with more than 25 students. The total sum which could be theoretically accrued by two districts is $70,000 (25 x $2,800).

**The state cost per pupil in this example is rounded to the nearest one hundred dollars.

Many smaller districts, it seemed, were unable to offer the salary necessary to attract the caliber of candidates they desired; by sharing the salary expenses with a neighboring district, they were able to overcome this problem. Some small districts have been keeping administrative costs down by requiring the superintendent to serve in the additional capacity of elementary school principal. Due to changes in State Department of Education regulations, this will be far more difficult in the future. To release funds usually allocated for the hiring of an elementary principal, some districts have chosen to share a superintendent.

Another explanation frequently cited for the shared superintendency was the desire on the part of two school boards to investigate possible whole-grade sharing in the future. Under a one-way, whole-grade sharing agreement, one district sends all of its students in certain grades to another district, paying the second district tuition. Under two-way sharing, each district is responsible for educating students in certain grades. The typical arrangement sends all junior high students to one district, high school students to the other district, and allows elementary students to attend school in their home district. Some school boards believe that the development of such grade sharing agreements will be expedited by hiring a shared superintendent at the outset. In some districts then, a shared superintendent is a precursor of things to come. By contrast, we found that in other districts the shared superintendency has been an outgrowth of pre-existing sharing arrangements between two districts, most notably in the areas of athletics and activities.

From a pragmatic standpoint, a shared superintendency is created when one district approaches another district and offers to purchase a certain percentage of the superintendent's contract through what is termed in Iowa a

28-E agreement. Generally speaking, districts split the contract 50-50; however, in our study there were some 60-40 and 70-30 arrangements, depending upon local circumstances. The majority of the superintendents maintained hard and fast schedules, spending time in each district proportional to the contract agreement. For continuity some superintendents spent the same two and one-half days in each district each week, while others had worked out some form of rotation over a two-week period. The superintendents who seemed the most satisfied with the time allocation had an understanding from the respective boards that they would be free to divide their time in a manner which was most appropriate, regardless of the contract. Therefore, in a case where two districts had a 50-50 agreement, a superintendent might decide to spend the entire week in one of the districts if he felt it was necessary at some point during the year. We gained the sense from these individuals that they were pleased to be allowed to exercise professional judgment and to demonstrate their integrity.

The Need to Re-define the Superintendent's Role

A theme which emerged in every interview focused on the role of the superintendent. A large number described the difficulties communities had experienced adjusting to the fact that the superintendent was far less visible and accessible than had previously been the case. In many small school systems, patrons have been used to raising questions informally with the superintendent during his attendance at civic functions. Indeed, participation in community events and maintaining a home in the school district are often high priorities among community members, and have a direct bearing on their perceptions of the superintendent's effectiveness. To employ a superintendent who lives in a neighboring community and is rarely seen in

the local coffee shop talking with residents is a difficult concept for some patrons to accept.

A frequent frustration voiced by the superintendents was a sense of losing personal control over the daily operation of each district. It was clear that many of them had set high personal standards of performance while they were employed by single districts. Upon moving into a sharing arrangement, many of them attempted to maintain these standards, but discovered that the increasing demands on time and energy required that they lower their personal standards. One superintendent's comments expressed the sentiments of many others: "You just have to accept the fact that you cannot be on top of everything as you would be in a single district. If you cannot live with the fact that some things, which you think should be done, will have to be allowed to slip, then you probably should not enter a sharing arrangement."

In light of such comments, it seemed that both communities and individual superintendents have to be willing to redefine the role of this senior administrator if a sharing arrangement is to prove successful. A number of participants observed that they had become "managers" as opposed to "instructional leaders" in their districts. Due to the requirement that separate meetings be held with the boards in each district, and the necessity of preparing separate reports and budgets for each district, the superintendents found themselves consumed with paperwork. The consequence of this increase in bureaucratic activity was a diminution, and frequent cessation, of instructional and curricula leadership activities. In spite of working weeks which often exceeded 70 hours, time spent traveling between districts, and meeting board members left little opportunity to become

directly involved with the educational program. As a consequence some participants referred to a sense of increased isolation, a separation from the actual practice of education. A few individuals had consciously resisted these forces and still found the time to meet teachers and enter classrooms.

Superintendents spoke at length about the difficulty of having to constantly "change gears." The need to move between one district and another could have a disorienting affect, forcing the superintendent to take frequent "reference checks" to ensure that he was enforcing the correct policy in the correct district. When administering a single district, a lot of details become absorbed subconsciously and are referred to frequently without the superintendent really being aware of it. When sharing two districts, however, superintendents find it necessary to ask themselves "now which district is this" before making specific decisions. The maintenance of two separate offices in two locations, often 10 or more miles apart, merely adds to this difficulty of living "a double professional life."

Some superintendents described measures they have taken to improve the efficiency of their management functions. A psychological strategy involved thinking of the superintendency in terms of a single district which had multiple buildings in two distinct geographic locations. Under such circumstances, the superintendency was likened to the situation facing superintendents in larger urban and metropolitan settings. As a practical manifestation of this mental attitude, some superintendents had formed "transition committees." These committees were composed of representatives from the school boards of each partner district and all the administrators in the two districts. The committee would discuss common problems and then make recommendations to the appropriate school boards regarding policy. Such an

administrative structure, when combined with steps to standardize procedures for budgeting, hiring, record keeping, etc., greatly improved the efficiency with which both districts were managed. An additional advantage of such an approach was that it allowed board members from both parties to see the superintendent acting in an impartial manner. In the absence of such structures, superintendents referred to the suspicions which sometimes arose, that they were favoring one partner district over another. Such doubts became particularly burdensome if one of the partners wished to pursue grade sharing or athletic sharing agreements but the other partner had no such desire.

In a small number of cases, a new position had been created entitled Assistant Superintendent or Administrative Assistant to the superintendent. The person filling this position would be permanently located in the district which did not hold the superintendent's contract. Such a position allowed the superintendent to delegate some of the managerial duties. In addition, and possibly more importantly, it provided each community with a symbolic leader to whom problems could be directed. In many cases the person occupying this position was also a part-time teacher, or part-time elementary principal, so a concrete link was also established between the faculty and the senior administrators.

When asked to identify one of the most significant factors influencing the effectiveness of a shared superintendent, a common response was district compatibility. In cases where two districts had widely differing aspirations, philosophies, financial status, and enrollments, the shared superintendent's job was made more difficult. A further factor which influenced effectiveness were the attitudes of members of each community toward the other. On occasions where intense and sometimes acrimonious rivalries had existed

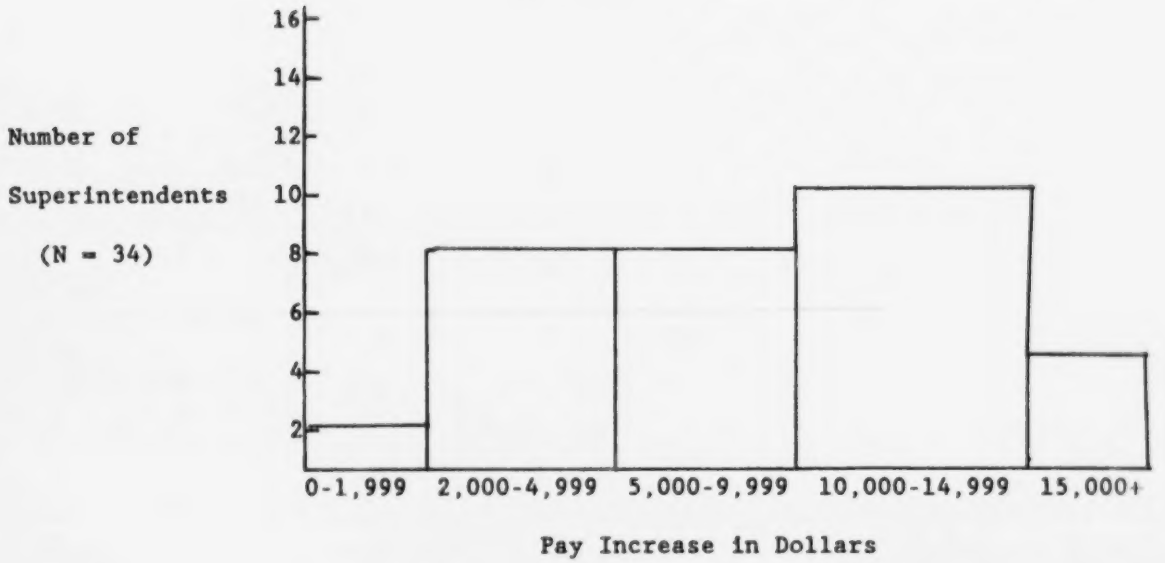
between two districts (often generated by athletic competition), a shared superintendent sometimes found himself acting as a mediator as well as a manager. Although, on the face of it, the presence of such attitudes may appear trivial, their influence on the effectiveness of a shared superintendent should not be underestimated.

What Motivates Shared Superintendents?

In view of the many challenges generated by the shared superintendency, and the highly stressful and time consuming demands it presents, we were interested in the personal motives of those individuals who had agreed to accept such a position. Personal challenge and job enrichment were often offered as explanations. Many of the superintendents were very experienced, with 10 or more years as a senior administrator; consequently they viewed the sharing agreement as an opportunity to test themselves. The majority seemed to be very task-oriented, self-motivated individuals, who enjoyed tackling the rigors of the position. In some cases, it was also viewed as a means of improving their employment prospects, and their chances of advancement into larger metropolitan school systems.

When we asked about the increased financial rewards for assuming extra duties and responsibilities, a considerable range was noted (see figure 1).

Figure 1



Based on the 34 participants who provided the information, the range of salary increases was from $0 to $17,000, with 47 percent receiving increases of $10,000 or more. Significantly, while the majority of the superintendents acknowledged the increase in responsibility which now fell on building principals, only 15 of them said that principals had received a salary increase accordingly. Apart from one notable exception of $8,000, such salary raises were in the $1,000 - $2,000 range.

As researchers, we were also interested in affects of the shared superintendency upon building principals. In many respects, it appeared that principals had assumed the building level autonomy which has been long desired. In the words of one participant, "With superintendents consumed with buildings, budgets, and boards it has fallen to principals to fulfill the instructional leadership role." In addition, however, many have also become responsible for some managerial tasks formerly addressed by the

superintendent, notably management of buses, non-certified staff, and purchasing. This raises the question in our minds about the ability of the principals to devote sufficient time to the instructional and curricular processes.

Words of Wisdom to Those Who Will Follow

To bring each interview to closure, we asked superintendents what words of wisdom they would share with colleagues considering a shared superintendency. The almost unanimous initial response to this question was to state the importance of clarifying the expectations of the respective boards. In the absence of sincere intentions to pursue further grade sharing agreements, and possible reorganization with the partner district within three to five years, the participants strongly discouraged consideration of a shared superintendency. They explained that it was possible to tolerate the added work load, increased stress, and role ambiguity if there were a definite target date when these pressures would dissipate. When working for two districts which merely wished to save money by sharing a salary expense, such conditions could remain indefinitely and make the shared superintendency almost intolerable.

Another point many superintendents were eager to emphasize was that a shared superintendency should not be viewed solely as a means of saving money. It should be viewed as a means of greater administrative efficiency and improved educational opportunity for students. To clarify the point, the reader should understand that due to state financial incentives to districts which share, the superintendent's salary in many cases is paid without reducing general fund revenues. In the view of the participants, the money saved should be used to hire specialists in the area of curriculum

development, whose services are frequently unavailable to small rural districts. In addition, financial savings should be used to compensate building principals to whom greater authority and autonomy has been delegated. Serious consideration should also be given to the creation of an Assistant Superintendent position, the incumbent being permanently located in one of the districts. Such a position helps to maintain communication between the partner districts, and serves important symbolic as well as practical functions.

The third piece of advice, concerned the superintendent's credibility. To hold any chance of success, a superintendent should be viewed as a very secure and respected individual in one district before agreeing to be shared with another district. Some of the most successful experiences in the shared superintendency were recounted by individuals who had held a position in one of the districts for more than 10 years. During this time, these individuals had built a favorable reputation which had spread beyond the boundaries of their own district. Consequently, when overtures were made to neighboring districts about sharing a superintendent, there was less hesitancy, because the individual concerned was a "known commodity." A corollary to this, was that an individual should be extremely cautious about taking a position as a shared superintendent when he has not been previously employed by either district. The difficulties of executing the numerous demands of the position are increased in magnitude many times when the superintendent is unfamiliar with the history and mores of the two districts.

Two more specific and practical points worthy of note concerned salary and logistics. In a small community, the superintendent is frequently one of the most highly paid residents. When sharing is discussed and the question of

salary increases is broached, opposition is sometimes quite intense. The public perception is that there is no valid reason to increase the pay differential between the superintendent and the average wage earner, particularly if the superintendent will be living in a different community. To overcome this conflict, several participants suggested publicizing the pertinent financial data to inform the community about the proportion of the superintendent's salary which will be paid for by state incentive funds. Failure to handle this issue correctly at the outset can result in deep-seated resentments which may reappear in a different guise at a later date.

From a logistical standpoint, superintendents should consider the physical distances between the two districts and also the quality of the roads. Although it might appear of limited significance, one superintendent explained that the sharing arrangement had come under severe stress because one of the districts believed he was spending too much time in the partner district. He explained that this may have been true, but it was the result of the 15 miles between the districts, and the fact that the most direct links were gravel roads. As a consequence, he had tended to conduct as much business as possible by telephone, and had reduced physical contacts to a minimum.

Conclusion

Having interviewed almost the entire population of shared superintendents in the state of Iowa, we feel it is possible to divide them into three categories, in descending order of success and satisfaction. The first category includes superintendents who are shared by two districts which had a number of other sharing agreements already established prior to the shared superintendency. This is particularly true in cases where two

districts have enjoyed a successful experience through a shared athletics and activities program. The second category includes superintendents who have been well established in a single district, and are then shared by a neighboring district with the explicit desire on the part of both districts to develop additional grade sharing agreements, and possibly district reorganization within three to five years. The final category includes those superintendents who are the least satisfied and the most disenchanted. These individuals have been hired to fulfill the necessary legal and managerial functions in two districts, and in so doing save money for both partners. Attempts by these superintendents either directly or covertly to move the partners toward additional sharing arrangements are frequently greeted with suspicion and resistance. It was superintendents in this category who would be the most hesitant about entering another shared superintendency in the future.

The research questions posed at the outset of this investigation have guided our thought process throughout the entire study. The first question concerned whether there were financial motives to enter into a shared superintendency.

As the researchers evaluated the subjects' responses, it became quite evident that in many instances either one or both districts involved in establishing a shared superintendency were doing so for financial reasons. In the event that a district was not driven principally by a financial motive, they invariably saw an opportunity to move toward providing an improved educational program for students and/or an opportunity for along-range relationships which could lead to district re-organization.

The second question centered around unique challenges identified by superintendents involved in the shared superintendency. Basically, four challenges were elaborated leading the researchers to identify a need to re-define the superintendent's role under a shared agreement.

First, it was apparent that many districts had difficulty adjusting to the fact that the superintendent was far less visible and accessible than had been the case in the past. The inability of the superintendent to participate in community events as had been the case in the past was a concern recognized by the majority of participating superintendents. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that they lived in one district and were rarely seen in the neighboring district. In some cases this provoked questioning of superintendent's trust and loyalty.

Second, frequent frustration was voiced by the participants in their perception of losing personal control over the daily operation of each district. Participants were quick to explain that they were no longer able to maintain the types of personal standards that they had set when they were involved with only one school district. The increased demand on time and energy restricted their ability to work at a level to which they had become accustomed.

A third challenge identified by the participants concerned the necessity to constantly "change gears" when moving from one district to the other. The participants found it very challenging to ensure that proper policies were being enforced and that they were not "mixing and matching" policies of the two districts. Reference checks were needed from time to time to make sure that the superintendent was enforcing the correct policy.

The fourth challenge commonly identified by the participants lead to the development of a "psychological strategy." Many of the participants found themselves likened to a single superintendency which had multiple buildings in two distinct locations. Many participants who feared the worst in these situations established "transition committees" to assist the shared superintendent. The committees were made up of representatives of both districts and usually met on a monthly basis. Common problems were identified with possible solutions suggested to the individual boards of education. Such an administrative structure, when combined with steps to standardize procedures in other administrative areas greatly improved the management efficiency of both school districts.

The absence of this type of structure provoked suspicion that they were favoring one district over the other. In some cases this was the crushing blow which caused distrust, disunity, and eventual collapse of the sharing agreement.

The third research question asked at the beginning of this investigation centered around what lessons had been learned as a result of the shared superintendency experience. The almost unanimous response alluded to the importance of clarifying the expectations of the respective boards of education. All of the participants were emphatic about the importance of discussing with the sharing boards of education the differences that will result as a consequence of employing a part-time superintendent. It was deemed immensely important to the superintendents who had experienced the transition first hand to make sure that future administrators considering a shared superintendent position have a serious discussion with both boards of education as to the managerial, political, and social realities of entering

into such an agreement. In fact, it was strongly concluded that without this type of deliberation and discussion the present participants strongly discourage consideration of a shared superintendency position.

A final note to the third research question was made by the majority of superintendents interviewed. The most successful experiences to date were recounted by those who had spent considerable time as the superintendent in one of the districts that was considering sharing. The longevity of the individual was helpful in establishing a favorable reputation as a known commodity. An individual with known qualities had a better chance of making the agreement work. The perceived suspicions were minimized and a more favorable and rewarding experience resulted for all concerned.

In conclusion, we hope this study is of interest to several audiences. First, it provides valuable insights for school boards and superintendents in small rural communities throughout Iowa and the United States. While local circumstances may vary, some of the lessons learned in Iowa have general application to all rural communities who for one reason or another are looking to reduce financial constraints and at the same time improve administrative efficiency. Change can be a very deliberate, slow process, as in the Iowa experience. However, the researchers must give credit to a state, its legislature, department of education, local boards of education, and the patrons of the state who have acknowledged the fact that education cannot stand still, and more productive and innovative ways of organizing and managing rural education need to be embraced. Without this type of initiative, rural school districts will have to reduce educational programs to meet spiraling financial costs with less money flowing to districts. As communities find it more difficult to increase local tax rates, other cost

saving measures will need to be considered. The state of Iowa has identified the need in education to do things differently if small rural schools are going to survive. Without looking at alternatives to existing concerns and problems, rural schools both in Iowa and the rest of rural America will close and hence the beginning of the end will be a reality. Second, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, we think this article should provide some food for thought for those boards and superintendents who operate large urban districts. While the problems which beset these districts receive far more attention in both the professional and popular media, the problems facing many of the rural areas of the country are just as intractable. An increased awareness of these less visible issues will hopefully be of value for all concerned.

APPENDIX A

Interview Form A

Superintendents Who Were Formerly Shared
by Two or More Districts

1. What were your feelings going into the shared superintendency?

2. Why was a decision made to share in the first place?

3. What were the perceived consequences of the building level administrator?

4. Words of wisdom to existing or new superintendents entering the shared superintendency?

5. What problems have you encountered?

6. What was your intended purpose for entering into the shared superintendency?

7. Would you willingly become a shared superintendent again? Why or why not?

8. To what extent is the shared superintendency an end or a means to survival?

Interview Form B

Superintendents Who Were Shared Prior To
and During the 1988-89 School Year

1. What were your feelings going into the shared superintendency?

2. Why was a decision made to share in the first place?

3. What was the experience like (strengths, weaknesses)?

4. What factors caused the discontinuence of the shared superintendency?

5. Were there any unique difficulties when administering in the capacity of a shared superintendency?

6. What were the perceived consequences for the building level administrator?

7. Words of wisdom to existing or new superintendents entering the shared superintendency?

8. What was your intended purpose for entering into the shared superintendency?

9. Would you willingly become a shared superintendent again? Why or why not?

10. To what extent is the shared superintendency an end or a means to survival?

Interview Form C

Superintendents Whose First Experience in a Shared Arrangement Occurred During the 1988-89 School Year

1. What were your feelings going into the shared superintendency?

2. Why was a decision made to share in the first place?

3. What was the experience like (strengths, weaknesses)?

4. Were there any unique difficulties when administering in the capacity of a shared superintendency?

5. What were the perceived consequences for the building level administrator?

6. Words of wisdom to existing or new superintendents entering the shared superintendency?

7. What was your intended purpose for entering into the shared superintendency?

8. What problems have you encountered?

9. Would you willingly become a shared superintendent again? Why or why not?

10. To what extent is the shared superintendency an end or a means to survival?